

Facing opposition and rejection

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on July 5, 2015, the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost.

And they took offense at him. Mark 6:3

We've all heard the usual high school and college commencement speeches telling the young graduates to go forth and take advantage of the education they have received. They may also be told to maintain their ideals in helping to make a better world. One of the more memorable speeches I heard was about how the speaker learned more from his failures than his successes. He advised the graduates that the sooner they take responsibility for their failures and mistakes, the better off they will be. Too often we blame our mistakes and failures on circumstances or on other people instead of taking responsibility for them.

Jesus created a sensation with his dynamic preaching, teaching and healing. He challenged the people of his own Jewish faith to reform the true meaning and intent of the law based on the Torah. He knew he would meet with opposition but was not prepared for rejection from the people of his own hometown of Nazareth. They knew him as the carpenter, the son of Mary whose brothers and sisters were their neighbors. For them he lacked credibility and he could not convince them of his mission.

When Jesus sends the apostles out to preach the gospel, he tells them to go two by two. Jewish tradition called for two witnesses when making a promise or a statement. Going in pairs would give greater courage to face risk of rejection. He tells them to take along only what they need. In the face of great opposition, they must be willing to endure great duress and persecution in proclaiming repentance, casting out demons and healing the sick.

Saint Paul is a towering figure of high intellect and eloquence who fought fiercely for the cause of Christ. He makes great strides in some places and is rejected in others. He tells us how he endured great hardship, persecution and calamities, having been beaten, stoned, jailed, shipwrecked, imprisoned and exiled. He refers to a mysterious "thorn in the flesh" that torments him. It is in his weakness that he finds strength and humility. He serves as an example that it matters not how many times we fall flat on our face. What is important is that we get back up and learn from the experience. In a world that values success over failure, it is far more important to be faithful in the sight of God than to be successful in the eyes of the world.

Those entering ordained ministry today need to know they will meet with opposition and indifference from an increasingly secular world. In retrospect, when I started out there was greater support for the church and less of the skepticism and cynicism so prevalent in the world today.

I am grateful for those who guided and encouraged me in my vocation as a Christian and as a priest. They gave me a greater understanding of what it means to be a Christian. They sometimes told me what I didn't want to hear but needed to know. One who had the most profound and positive effect on my spiritual development was a college chaplain. He was the most authentically spiritual person I have ever known and was a great influence in my calling to be a priest. He would never have known what a profound effect he had on me had I not written to him years later to tell him how much I learned from him in developing my basic understanding of the Christian faith. It is important to tell people how much we appreciate their encouragement and help. Sending a bouquet of flowers when they die is too late.

I like to apply my faith in practical ways. When I was as a young rector in my first parish I was trained to serve as an emergency medical technician in a volunteer ambulance corps. For me, it was not just community service; it was an extension of my ministry. I cared for the sick and injured and tended to those who had died and comforted their families. I bound up people who were injured in some of the most bizarre accidents. In many cases it was as much their broken spirits as their broken bodies that needed urgent care. It didn't bother me to handle accident victims and sudden deaths because my attention was focused on their needs rather than my own.

When it comes to applying the gospel and taking a stand on matters of social justice, we cannot afford to remain timidly on the sidelines. There are times when we have to witness to what is right and just, especially in the face of opposition. If we believe in the dignity and value of every human being, we have to take a stand. At the risk of becoming unpopular, we must not

mislead others by our silence. We must speak up when people are being treated unjustly. Too often I hear people say that when someone was being maligned they just listened and said nothing. Cowardly silence allows them to assume that you are in agreement.

Yesterday we celebrated the 239th anniversary of independence as a nation. We were founded on certain principles that guaranteed equal rights for everyone. For that principle to apply to everyone took longer than it should have. We rejoice that marriage equality has been achieved and that affordable health care is now available to those millions for whom it wasn't.

During the Civil War, the south fought to preserve their way of life that was dependent upon the evil of slavery. I had great-grandfathers on opposite sides of that tragic conflict. One was a surgeon in the Confederate army and the other was a courier who once had his horse shot out from under him. The Confederate flag represents the evil of the institution of slavery and it has no place flying over a capitol building or anywhere else.

I have long believed that the U.S. should lift the embargo against Cuba that has caused economic hardship for the Cuban people. We are long overdue in moving toward normalizing diplomatic and trade relations with that island nation after more than fifty years.

Whether the church takes the lead on social issues is not as important that we work together to fulfill the pledge of liberty and justice for all. If we are to maintain our integrity as a free people, we cannot afford to be spectators on human rights issues. We have to be willing to take the risk of getting involved. Christian witness often means comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.

In the final analysis, faithfulness is the best defense against compromising our integrity as the people of God. We dedicate ourselves to assuring that all people are guaranteed their equal rights and responsibilities.